

## Learning how Rivers speak with co-operative inquiry

### At this Time

*And what will ye do in the end thereof? Jeremiah 5:31*

At this time

the Anthropocene  
the Plantationocene  
the Capitalocene  
the Misanthropocene  
the Anthrobscene  
or possibly,  
the Ecoscene  
the Symbioscene  
the Chthulucene.

At this time

when we are called to speak of crisis,  
permacrisis, polycrisis, metacrisis  
(choose your own prefix)  
when human actions overwhelm the interwoven  
rhythms of Earth's story  
when we weary at listing yet again the calamities  
inflicted on the living world  
when we know these calamities are not separate events  
but mutually reinforcing patterns  
when the rupture in the Earth System extends to the  
atmosphere, hydrosphere, cryosphere,  
lithosphere, biosphere  
when the intricate feedback loops  
which maintained the habitable Earth for millennia  
are thrown out of kilter  
when the patriarchy raises its ugly head again  
with war, religious violence,  
nationalism and authoritarianism  
when Gaia cries out in self-evident pain  
when the storm is gathering

how should we live?  
to what work are we called?<sup>i</sup>

## Responding to the metacrisis of our times

Those of us addressing the climate and ecological catastrophe are called to many paths:

Some are called to be climate scientists, conservationists, renewable energy specialists. Some are called to culturing public opinion and pressuring governments as activists, journalists, educators, lawyers.

Some are called to politics, within major political parties or in political pressure groups. Some are called to develop economic systems and business practices that do not exploit humans and the more-than-human world.

Some are called to radically reduce their material impact on the world, disengaging from the materialist culture of our times, setting an example that a different lifestyle is possible.

Some are called to work with the disadvantaged and oppressed of human societies, knowing that ecological devastation is intimately linked with human oppression.

All these, and more are needed; and these are not exclusive, either/or choices, although most of those engaging with the ecological catastrophe focus their time and energies on one primary path. And in the context of the current collection of writing on action research in this volume and elsewhere, it is important to note that all these works are fruitful sites for an action research approach: fostering participation in communities of inquiry, drawing on multiple ways of knowing, cycles of action and reflection, experiments in action. This was my work for many years, collaborating, supervising, and directing action research projects addressing issues of justice and sustainability in a wide range of settings (Marshall, Coleman, & Reason, 2011, 2023; Reason, 2011).

My own calling over the past years has been to draw on participative inquiry toward the re-enchantment of our world (Curry, 2024), specifically to converse with Rivers. As I elaborate below, I have been working with other human persons in co-operative inquiry to explore how we may invoke Rivers as sentient beings within a living and responsive cosmos; and through this to seek a deeper transformation of our relation with the more-than-human world. With my co-inquirers I have been addressing questions of the kind:

*What does it mean to live on Earth, not as a collection of objects, but as a community of living, sentient, communicative beings? How do we learn to invoke such a world? How do adults experience Rivers and water places as living and responsive? How can people intentionally cultivate skills and ways of knowing, being and doing that enable the ability to respond to the more-than-human world?*

The sceptic (and at times my own inner sceptic) might ask why I am doing this? What is the point of talking with River when there are so many worthwhile practical projects to address the catastrophe? But this question plays directly into the problem-solving, activist, power-over paradigm of our times. When I go down to engage River as a living being, my scepticism looks absurd:

*As I walk out in the early morning still-darkness, as I cross the field, watching the light gathering ahead of me in the east, listening to the birds singing in the wooded hillside, then catch my first glimpse of River winding its way, reflecting the lightening sky back to me, the question 'What is the point of this?' rarely comes to*

*my mind. And when River gestures in response to my overtures, when Kingfisher flies past at an apposite moment, the experiences are deeply felt and unassailably authentic.*

As we know only too well, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House' (Lorde, 1984). Work to address the climate and ecological crisis is usually conceived and undertaken within a worldview that continues to see a divide between 'humans' and 'nature', that continues to see humans as the sole agents within a world of objects. Such a perspective sees the climate and ecological catastrophe as a technical problem to be solved within the existing Western paradigm.

In all our worthy endeavours, something remains missing. Modern capitalist society draws has a great capacity to co-opt and normalize potentially radical practices; and so:

- We are encouraged to conserve 'nature' because of the evident benefits to human health and wellbeing. This is perilously close simply seeing 'nature' as a resource for humans, an 'ecoservice'.
- Economists suggest that we place a value on nature, to put a price on carbon emissions, cost the 'externalities' of manufacturing operations, calculate the value of living trees compared with lumber. But this also has the effect of drawing the more-than-human into a dysfunctional economic system and implying that nature is 'up for sale' (Raworth, 2017).
- The continuing campaigns of bodies such as Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil have been successful to some extent in heightening the climate catastrophe. But they are also divisive and have been drawn into legalistic arguments concerning valid defences for direct action and the rights and obligations of juries.
- The campaigns to bestow legal rights to Rivers and other eco-systems have significant appeal and many practical advantages.<sup>ii</sup> However, bestowing rights, or recognizing rights, still starts from the human initiative and draws River into our human-created legal system with its unacknowledged assumptions about individualism and property ownership. Academic environmental lawyer Anna Gear argues it is 'wrongheaded to protect nature with human-style rights' that we need to develop a 'new framework in which the human is entangled and thrown in the midst of a lively materiality' (Gear, 2019). In many Indigenous cultures and traditions, River and more generally Land comes first, and humans derive their rights and Laws from Land and the broader community of life, not the other way round (Poelina, Bagnall, et al., 2024; Rodríguez-Garavito, 2024).
- Some organizations create posts for 'nature guardians' on company and institutional boards. This seems an attractive idea, yet the appointments are often tokenistic. Those appointed are placed in a potentially impossible position: how are they to hold their authority, to genuinely and radically represent 'nature' and avoid being co-opted into the prevailing worldview, without being labelled as extreme idealists and green loonies?

It may seem churlish to pick holes in worthy projects such as these, given they reach out to bridge the gap between the pragmatic and the ideal. But they remain in danger of supporting the very system they aim to undermine. As Charlotte DuCann, co-director of the Dark Mountain Project (Dark Mountain Project, 2009), argues:

Modern civilisations deliberately block access to the living intelligence of the planet and put fierce doorkeepers and troll bridge guardians to stop anyone escaping the dominance of the rational mind (DuCann, 2024).

How then do we respond more deeply to the catastrophe of our times? We may follow Joanna Macy's argument that new practices and institutions 'cannot take root and survive without deeply engrained values to sustain them. They must mirror what we want and how we relate to Earth and each other' (Macy & Brown, 1998:21). Or, with Freya Mathews, agree that a 'genuinely ecological consciousness really requires a deep level of interrelationship with the living world' (personal communication 2024). Or listen to Gary Snyder when he tells us that to see the world as sacred is to 'take us... out of our little selves into the whole mountains-and-rivers mandala universe' (Snyder, 1990b:94).

### **The challenge is (in part) metaphysical**

Another work, to take place alongside those outlined above, may call some of us to practices that might be called 'post-activism' (Akómoláfé, 2020). This work is an attempt to shift the metaphysical foundations of Western society. The argument goes something like this: The catastrophe of our time has deep roots in the worldview of the Western world. We can argue over the details, but broadly the foundational pathologies of Western civilization – characterised by dualism, splitting of humans and nature, and a lust for power and control (the 'ideology of mastery' (Ghosh, 2024)) – had their origins in the monotheism of early Judaism (Helmuth, 2015), were formalized by Greek philosophers, amplified by institutional Christianity, solidified in the Enlightenment, and given an extra consequential twist when this worldview was twinned with late-stage capitalism coupled with a materially exploitative technology powered by fossil fuels. This view tells us that the world is made of separate things, objects of nature composed of inert matter operating according to causal laws. They have no subjectivity, consciousness or intelligence, and no intrinsic purpose, value, or meaning. And it tells us that mind and physical reality are separate. Humans – modern humans – and humans alone, have the capacity for rational thinking and action and for understanding and giving meaning to the world.

It must be noted that there is a long undercurrent of thought which is fundamentally opposed to the dominant perspective. Gregory Bateson points to

... a very wide range of philosophic thinking, going back to Ancient Greece, and wriggling through the history of European thought over the last 2000 years... the argument took the shape of "Do you ask what it's made of – earth, fire, water, etc? Or do you ask, "What is its pattern?" (Bateson, 1972:449)

This line of thinking originated with the Pythagoreans, followed by the Gnostics, (Harding, 2009) and complexity theorists (Boulton, 2024). To mainstream thinking this perspective can appear both mystical and functionally irrelevant. It must struggle for acceptability and its distinguished philosophical lineage is usually unacknowledged and unrecognised. However, often expressed through poetics as much as logic, this perspective provides for a re-enchantment of the world and an honouring of the rights

of the more-than-human. It challenges us to discover a new form of knowing, and utilise methodologies that honour the integration of mind, matter and politics with epistemology and ontology. It is a stream of thought carried historically by philosophers such as Giordano Bruno (Yates, [1964](#)), Spinoza ([1994](#)), Bergson ([1911](#)), Whitehead ([1929](#)), Bateson ([1972b](#)); and in current times by panpsychist and feminist philosophers such as Abram ([1996](#)), Mathews ([2003](#)), Rose ([1996](#)), Plumwood ([1993](#)) and Barad ([2007](#)).

The foundational pathologies of the dominant worldview now rise up to haunt us (for an excellent review of the impact of the western worldview see Curry, 2024).. They are re-enforced in every moment of our ‘civilized’ lives by a cultural and economic system that draws everything into its maw. At root, the problem of our times is metaphysical and so an adequate response must include a metaphysical transformation – or at least a deep understanding of the root assumptions of our culture. Bateson, many years ago, put it graphically:

If you... see yourself as outside and against the things around you.... you will see the world around you as mindless and therefore not entitled to ethical or moral consideration... If this is your estimate of your relation to nature *and you have an advanced technology*, your likelihood of survival will be that of a snowball in hell. You will die either of the toxic by-products of your own hate, or... of overpopulation and overgrazing (Bateson, 1972:462; original emphasis)

Metaphysical transformation calls for a return to a deep examination and revision of the underlying assumptions and taken-for-granted perspectives of society, a return to metaphysics as the study of the ultimate nature of reality: for the essence of a metacrisis a ‘misunderstanding, misvaluing, and misappropriating of reality’ (Rowson, 2023); Metaphysics is a philosophical discipline that has fallen out of fashion in the face of the rationalism and empiricism of science and later postmodernism. Kant showed metaphysics as empty; far from having anything to say about reality but rather reflecting the organizing assumptions of cognition itself, ‘proving’ what is presupposed. The postmodernists further showed all theoretical devices are discursive devices reflecting political interests. And as Black writer and activist James Baldwin put it more graphically, modern Westerners are ‘mad victims of our own brainwashing’ (Baldwin, 1962). In the absence of metaphysical debate, scientific inquiry is based on its own materialist metaphysical assumptions while at the same time denying it has any. As argued above, these assumptions led, at least in part, to the ecological catastrophe of our times. (For a fuller exploration of the need for a return to metaphysics, see Mathews, 2008)

Of course, participatory forms of action research always have a metaphysical edge, presenting a challenge to the Western worldview. Once people in whatever walk of life become researchers of their own situation with a view to transforming it in their own interests, the subject-object dualism which is at the heart of orthodox science is undercut – as are the power structures which maintain it. But, on the whole, action researchers have tended to emphasize the political and liberatory dimensions of participation, seeking to change the relationship between power and knowledge, rather than explore the ontological issues implied in human, especially Western, relationships to the ecology of the planet.

Mathews (2008) argues for the necessary return to metaphysical argumentation to counter the dogmatic dominance of the mechanical empirical scientific understanding of reality. As we can see from the accounts of Indigenous Elders, the world is very different when it is conceived and felt and experienced as animate and responsive, when it is a communion of subjects rather than a collection of inanimate objects (Seeing, feeling, and hearing the world, in Reason, 2024). 'Take care of Country and Country will take care of you' is utterly different from 'Drill, baby, drill!' Mathews shows how, in contemporary philosophical terms, a new metaphysics must meet the challenges of Kant and the postmodernists: it must be post-dogmatic, have substantive content, explain things not just in *a priori* content, and be in some sense testable. Mathews offers the example of the Buddha's teaching, which was not offered as a dogma but as an inquiry to be pursued in the critical subjective process of their own minds, with meditation practices seen as forms of inquiry. Scientist and Ch'an Master John Crook referred to this as 'subjective empiricism' (Crook, 2009).

It is important to emphasize that such metaphysical revision is not a purely intellectual pursuit: it must be grounded in our practice in the world. It must be consequential, impact on how we live our lives. Indeed, there is arguable that to start with theory is to start in the wrong place, because a theory necessarily places us in a position as spectator, looking at a world that is essentially separate from us, out there and so manipulable (Mathews, 2016, 2017b). Further, we may spend so much time getting our theory right, adjusting and disputing the finer points, that we forget the life is about living. This point came home to me recently when reading the final chapter of religious writer Karen Armstrong's memoir *The Spiral Staircase*. She recounts a conversation with the [Jewish-British](#) scholar Hyam Maccoby:

He told me that in most traditions, faith was not about belief but about practise. Religion is not about accepting 20 impossible propositions before breakfast, but about doing things that change you. It is a moral aesthetic, and ethical alchemy. If you behave in certain in a certain way you will be transformed. The myths and laws of religion are not true because they conform to some metaphysical, scientific or historical reality but because they are life enhancing. (Armstrong, 2004:304)

The purpose of theory, then, is to provide a rationale, to keep what McGilchrist (McGilchrist, 2009, 2021) would term the left-hemisphere of the brain, with its need for rationality and certainty, quiet and not too disturbed, while we engage in an alternative form of practice.

So we don't think ourselves into a belief that the world is sentient and communicative; we start in practice, engaging with the world as sentient and responsive. we act our way into this by adopting some form or forms of practice: addressing the beings of the world as persons, listening with close attention, creating ceremonial forms and gestures which invoke these qualities. In a sense we are following Søren Kierkegaard teaching that 'The function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays.' (Kierkegaard, 2009 (1847))

Mathews own metaphysical inquiry leads her to articulate *living cosmos panpsychism*, which draws on the alternative stream of philosophy that Bateson was pointing to, in particular that of Spinoza (Mathews, 2003, 2017c, 2019, 2021, 2023). This starts from the understanding that mind is a fundamental aspect of matter just as matter is a fundamental aspect of mind: we are part of a world that is a communicative whole, with depth as well as structure, meaning as well as form. In Thomas Berry's words, this is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects (Berry, 2006), a community whose members reach out to each other in mutual contact and communication, co-creating a 'poetic ecology'. The significant point is that the expression of meaning does not emanate only from the human side. Although the modern Western assumptions of a brute and non-sentient world mean that we are alienated from this community, the world is nevertheless capable of – actively seeks – engagement with us. This opens the possibility of a 'communicative encounter, of reciprocal presence, presence that *answers back* when our questions send out tentacles of attention in search of it' (Mathews, 2017a:5).

This means that when we invoke the world as sentient presence, we may be graced with a response. Of course, this doesn't take place in human language: it is necessarily a *poetic* order, conveying meaning in image and metaphor, taking place not in words or concepts, but through material form in a symbolic language of *things*: animals and birds appear; the breeze ruffles the trees, cloud formations change, all in ways that are apposite and synchronous with our invocation. Mathews calls communicative engagement with the world 'ontopoetics' (2009, 2017c). To speak of onto-poetics is to imply not only that the world is psycho-active, as panpsychism implies, but also that it is *responsive* to us, that we bring to it – or can bring to it, if we choose – an attention that calls it forth on a new expressive plane, a plane of meaning and not merely of causation (Reason, 2023a).

### **Co-operative inquiry and onto-poetics**

What form of inquiry is suitable for metaphysical inquiry, for 'testing' such arguments experientially and empirically? I have come to see that co-operative inquiry – the form of action research with which I have been most identified – has key characteristics that make it profoundly suitable for this kind of metaphysical inquiry: it treats those involved – both human and by extension other-than-human persons – as subjective, self-directing beings and therefore as equal participants in the inquiry process; it emphasizes the experiential ground of knowing; and it asserts the primacy of practice – it is not possible to recognise a world of sentient beings simply by thinking about it, but by enacting and experiencing it.

In traditional research, the roles of the researcher and subject are mutually exclusive: the researcher only contributes the thinking that goes into the project, and the subjects only contribute the action to be studied. In co-operative inquiry, these exclusive roles are replaced by mutual relationships, so that all involved work together as both co-researchers and co-subjects. Everyone is engaged in the design and management of the inquiry; everyone gets into the experience and action that is being explored; everyone is involved in making sense and drawing conclusions. Participants work together through cycles of action and reflection, developing their understanding and practice by engaging in an "extended epistemology": *experiential knowing* brings attention to bear on the lifeworld of everyday lived; *presentational knowing* is the first clothing or

articulation of experiential knowing – we ‘tell the story’, make a sketch, maybe sing or dance as an expression of our experience, often bringing it into consciousness for the first time to ourselves and to others as we do so; *propositional knowing* is knowing ‘about’ something in intellectual terms, in ideas and theories, expressed in propositions and statements using language; *practical knowing* is knowing ‘how to’, knowing-in-action.

The aim is to develop a non-dogmatic process of inquiry in which ideas are tested against practice and experience, and experience is held up to the critical gaze of reasoned argument. Through this cycling, ideas and assumptions are held up against the evidence of experience; and experience is held up against reasoned debate. Fundamental to co-operative inquiry are practices of that foster ‘critical subjectivity’, an inquiry culture in which unfounded assumptions and evidence are called into question (Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, 2001, 2005, 2008; Kurio & Reason, 2022; Reason, 2023a).

My colleagues and I have brought the disciplines of co-operative inquiry to bear on our exploration of onto-poetics through our Living Waters inquiry workshops. We draw on Mathews’ living cosmos panpsychism along with the other perspectives which share a view of the world as animate, sentient, communicative, and participative: the biopoetics of Andreas Weber (Weber, 2016a, 2016b, 2017); the Animate Gaia theory of Stephan Harding (Harding, 2009, 2022; Harding & Margulis, 2010); and the kinship social geography of Sandra Woollorton (Poelina, Perdrisat, Woollorton, & Mulligan, 2023, 2024).

*Early one Spring morning, I visit my usual spot by River. Later that day with my colleagues I will open the first Living Waters workshop. I am visiting River with the specific intent of telling kī<sup>iii</sup> about our inquiry and asking for blessing. Shortly after I arrive, Kingfisher flies across in front of me at head height and continues down the left bank and under the railway bridge.*

*I take this as a prompt to bow, call my names, and speak to River. I tell River about the inquiry, of the twenty-eight human persons round the planet invoking Rivers as sentient beings. I thank River for all teaching I have received over the years that have brought me to this point, and for the opportunity to lead this inquiry. And I offer the bundle of found objects – pieces of dried grass and twigs – I put together as a tangible token of human collaboration with Rivers, throwing it out into the stream, watching as it slowly drifts downstream, under the bridge and out of sight.*

*Then two Kingfishers fly out of the Frome and across River toward the right bank, low across the water. They do not fly straight and true as usual but seem to frolic together in the air; I wonder if they are courting. Then another follows behind, showing both red breast and turquoise wing feathers. I am amazed at this response to my call and get to my feet to give thanks. As I do so, two more Kingfishers fly past.*

*To be visited six times by Kingfisher on one occasion seems like a full – almost extravagant – blessing to our inquiry. (‘Cracked open with love’ in Reason, 2024)*



### **Co-operative inquiry with River**

Living Waters is a series of international inquiry communities, originally sponsored by Schumacher College,<sup>iv</sup> meeting virtually through Google Drive and Zoom. The aim is to explore and develop a deeper transformation in our relation to the world. The faculty offer comprehensive introductions to the orienting perspectives they bring to the inquiry through YouTube videos (Reason, Mathews, Weber, Harding, & Woollorton, 2021). Participants then work in inquiry groups of about six, facilitated by a faculty member, engaging in cycles of inquiry. They:

- visit a River close to their home regularly and explore how to invoke its living presence, to enter into discourse, to learn how Land and River speak.
- explore different approaches to invocation – loving attention, meditation, ceremony, song, gift-giving (See Forms of Invocation, Reason, 2024);
- find initial presentational form in writing, photography, video, poetry, and drawing.
- post these on Google Drive and read each other’s accounts.
- meet weekly to share experiences and make sense together.
- decide the practical actions to be taken in the subsequent cycle.
- then after several cycles, draw learning together.

The Living Waters inquiries include weekly meetings of the whole community at which underlying theory is presented and discussed; and workshop sessions to draw together learning from the project as a whole (Reason, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2024).

It is worth noting that you don’t need a co-operative inquiry, you can start your own first-person inquiry (Marshall, 2016) into living in a sentient and responsive world. In someways it’s very simple: You sit with River or Tree or Mountain or another being in the more-than-human world and offer your loving attention. You regard them as you might do a brother or a sister or a mother or a teacher – for they are indeed all these things – and open yourself to their response. Maybe you devise and conduct ceremonies of invocation. But remember Shepherd’s (1975) insistence to ‘never do alone what two can do’. The human inquiry group offers an important support and inspiration in this work as participants on Living Waters attest (See The Co-operative Inquiry Group, Reason, 2024). You can draw together one or two people with similar interest and build an inquiry group over time. Indeed, one of the origins of Living Waters was the inquiry duo that Peter and Jacqueline Kurio started together, agreeing to visit local Rivers to invoke their personhood and to meet regularly to share experiences. This inquiry soon expanded as they invited a small group of friends to join them (Kurio & Reason, 2022). This group, with varying membership, has continued to engage in cycles of inquiry over four years.

### **Experiential evidence for a sentient, responsive world.**

We have curated our co-researchers’ accounts using their own words and images to present narratives of experience of encounter with the sentient other-than-human. These accounts are drawn from repeated encounters, cycles of action and careful

reflection with colleagues. Together we have spent many hours with, by, and even in Rivers; and many hours in individual and shared reflection on what we have experienced. These accounts are presented most fully in *Learning How Land Speaks* (Reason, 2024); we can summarise the range of experience as follows:

- For many co-inquirers the initial challenge to get over internalized materialist assumptions, the inner voices that question the whole activity. Beyond that is the need to quieten the mind enough to give fuller attention to River: many found themselves at first distracted and self-absorbed.
- Once inner voices were somewhat quietened, co-inquirers found it was still easy to drop into a traditional subject/object relationship, to look at the River, maybe as beautiful and to be valued, but as still 'out there'. However, with persistence, practice, and support from the inquiry community, most people were able to sustain a feeling of sentient presence, and then move into what one group called 'getting in the zone', with the world feeling embodied and one's own animal body as part of it, accompanied often by feelings of pleasure and gratitude, and maybe wonder at the sheer beauty of it all. Mary writes from her experience:

*To experience this, it seems we have to suspend just about everything we think we know about how things are. Instead of racing through the world, we have to tip toe through, reach out, and make a lot of space and time for the signs that are around us all the time. In this reaching out, I am generating a different quality of presence by honouring the natural world. I can do this much. I can honour and pay attention and be very simple in that. But my thinking mind is not used to this. I have only glimpses of what I am talking about... 'traces' as they say.*

- Going deeper, there may arise a curious juxtaposition of the ordinary and the extraordinary; and close to that a profound feeling that the world is *all* extraordinary. Johanna writes of her experience with Pond:

*...this experience has opened my eyes to a new understanding of what it means to be in participation. If I show up as a member of the community, if I attend to, listen, notice, and communicate as a community member, I will be shaped and become a part of Pond, just as Pond will be shaped and become a part of me.*

- One may also develop a complex imaginative psychic response, as if the world is somehow 'speaking' in words and images. Justina, in some personal distress, cries while with River:

*Even with my eyes closed I feel River's taking that away for me, doing all this work for me. I feel that River is happy to have my tears. I'm going to put one of my tears into the river. It is quite muddy here, but I can reach down without sinking in. "There you go, River, one of my tears". (narratives excerpted from Experiential evidence for a sentient world, in Reason, 2024)*

- There may be what one group called 'slipping under the psychic skin of the world' or 'lifting the veil' when the illusion of separation slips away, and quite close to the Buddhist notions of direct perception, 'seeing the nature'. Dave,

sitting at Golitha Falls in Cornwall, writes:

*At first the elemental water absorbs all my vision. But for moments I feel and sense this torrent as a whole system, a oneness* (Seeing the Nature, in Reason, 2021).

(Seeing the Nature, in Reason, 2024)

- Finally, there may be active onto poetic responses when the world gestures back: animals appear, the weather changes, synchronicities arise. Each of such experiences is necessarily unique to itself, but something of the nature of the experience maybe gathered from this account of a pilgrimage I undertook with my co-inquirer Dave along the River Fowey in Cornwall.

*We left Dave's car at the National Trust car park by the bridge at Raspryn and walked upstream. The path follows River through grassland with many magnificent old trees – mainly oaks. After a bit less than a mile, we came to a wooden kissgate, where we offered thanks and gratitude, borrowing the Lakota prayer, Mitákuye Oyás'īŋ – 'All my Relations' (Hogan, 1995) – and entered the ceremonial space.*

*River winds between natural banks, running high and fast, but still quite a way from flooding beyond these bounds. We walked quietly, not chatting now, and stopped several times to watch the flow – in some places smooth and swift, in others marked by standing waves, overfalls, back eddies – patterns that are always changing and always the same. River's voices are very different one stretch to another: the shallows swirl and burble, the quieter languid reaches are smooth, catlike, purring.*

*As we watched the water rushing past, we both found it drew us into a more open quality of consciousness – in particular where the stream rushed past behind the overhanging branches, so that two patterns overlay each other.*

*After maybe a mile overall we reached Dave's spot at a big bend in River where he has been sitting and swimming these last months. He showed me how the water level had overwhelmed the shallows and the eyot in the middle of River, almost completely covering the little beach where he usually sits, so we stood on the bank, on a little peninsula between the flooded beach and a small tributary.*

*We had agreed we would do ceremony but had not talked about what form it might take. I think I started by saying 'You should introduce me', at which Dave took my hand – I remember the feel of his hand in mine, large, strong, companionable – and introduced me to River as brother. We stood holding hands facing downstream and sang several rounds of *The River She is Flowing*. Dave made his offering of water he had collected from the little shrine he has built by the stream on his land, scattering it in a wide arc over the surface. I followed, standing on the edge of the bank, introducing myself with my given, Medicine and Sacred Names. I called out that I brought greetings from the Rivers Frome and Avon, and from By Brook. I offered the water I had brought from a similar flooded beach on the By Brook. I asked for teaching and poured the water from my bottle into River, paying close attention to the steady stream. Just as I just finished, I hear Dave say, "We have brought on the rain", and sure enough, on this overclouded but quite dry day, a tiny rain shower*

*moved across River surface from the far bank. It lasts less than ten seconds, then just as suddenly it was gone. It was one of those movements of the world that would be so easy to overlook, and yet felt unmistakably a response to our little ceremony. (A Shower of Rain, in Reason, 2024)*

As Freya remarked in response to our story, ‘The ten-second shower story is just glorious – what could be lovelier! There is so much opportunity for love and joy in this world that we callow moderns never even dream of!’

To experience for ourselves the intimately apposite poetic responsiveness of place or landscape to our communicative overtures, of creek or river or mountain to our pilgrimage, is to be shifted on our metaphysical moorings. It is to feel graced, even loved, by world (Mathews, 2017a).

### **The Quality of Metaphysical Shift**

What does it mean to be ‘shifted on our metaphysical moorings’? Many metaphors are possible. One might describe this as a ‘moment of grace’ (Reason, 2017), when a crack opens in our taken-for-granted world; we experience a different world that is nevertheless the same world; it is a world not of separate things, not fixed in form, but forever changing; not inert, but a communion of subjectivity. One inquiry group described it as the ‘lifting of a veil’, a threshold or liminal space:

These gateways do not seem to be directly open to the consciousness mind or to will. While there is work to be done in preparing oneself – through quieting the mind, holding an intention, or ceremonial gesture, one cannot make it happen. It is a strange and subtle process: one needs to be prepared and open, but the shift is entirely unpredictable. You can’t make it happen, for the shift comes without forethought; but one can learn to recognize the opening. One moment the world around it is taken-for-granted normalness, the next moment the opening arises spontaneously, and one knows there is something else behind the veil into which one can allow oneself to drop with an accompanying loss of separate identity and a deepening sense of gratitude, of beauty, of belongingness to the place (See *Thresholds and Liminality*, in Reason, 2024)

For many, the term ‘metaphysics’ may conjure up serious debate among philosopher and theologians reaching learned conclusions. Yet through the inquiry process there has been both joy and playfulness. And one of the pathologies of the modern worldview is the quest for certainty and the downplay of mystery. It is only when means-ends relationships are relaxed that something new can emerge. And here we find another commonality with the wider field of action research: ‘By engaging in AR in a participatory, democratic, creative and embodied way, we enact the world we want to see and create a platform or relationships ready to continue engaging’ (Alfredo Ortez, editorial comment, 2025).

Much of the experience of participants in the Living Waters co-operative inquiries has been about delicately approaching that which is half-known, which is beneath a veil we are not sure how to lift, the other side of a threshold we don’t quite know how to cross. What kind of practice enables us to hold this space open? What kind of ‘post-activism’

allows us to give the almost-known our full attention without dragging it into the harsh light of rational consciousness? And what is it that alternate reality to which we are attending? We can learn from artists, as in sculptor Anish Kapoor's reflections of Rembrandt:

Why is Rembrandt a great artist? Is it because he's technically up to it? No, absolutely not. It is, I believe, because he is able to look into himself and see what is only half present. He's looking to the esoteric, to the half known, to this sense of the human being on the edge. I would go as far as to say that that is the role of the artist: to look at the half known, the unknown, the almost known, or to allow the practice to be that space of unknowing' (Kapor, 2024).

Which seems to parallel my own recent record of encounter with Orchard

I take one last look out over the Orchard... and suddenly... a sudden sense... how to say it... a little shock... as I look back at the trees and cowslips and see... it's almost as if I catch a glimpse of a dance of life... everything dancing... And then it's, it's gone... as if it's just beyond... just on the boundary of what's within reach and what isn't... this morning (personal inquiry record).

Many contemporary thinkers – for example physicist Carlo Rovelli (2020) and polymath Iain McGilchrist (2009) – teach that relationships are ontologically primary, and 'things' a secondary, emergent property of relationships. "Entities' are nothing other than ephemeral nodes in this web... Everything is what it is only with respect to something else' (Rovelli, 2020:197). River is alive, animate, sentient; yet this aliveness can only be manifest in relationship, in a community of life that includes all living beings. Within the community, yet somehow separated from it, modern human society has accumulated much repressive and manipulative power: it is as if Land and River can no longer speak with modern humans. River is almost silenced when it is treated as non-living, and this silencing is also manifest in physical means – controlling flow, channelling and the hardening of banks, pollution, and other forms of ecocide.

When we invoke River as a living, sentient being, any response is necessarily poetic, metaphoric, since the language available to River is a symbolic language of things – arranging concrete particulars in meaningful configurations (Mathews, 2023:38), along with a resonance with the human heart (The Invisible Work, in Reason, 2024). It is also relational: since our invocation will be in terms drawn from our own particular narrative or poetic frames of reference; River may respond by arranging itself to match those terms.

In doing this we are participating in the creative process of the cosmos. The living cosmos unfolds by self-differentiating into a multitude of finite beings – a community of subjects. Through their interaction, these finite 'selves' share perspectives and increase the field of intersubjective meaning (Mathews, 2023:85). As we discover new ways of speaking with River, new possibilities for response arise and the field of intersubjective meaning increases.

Scharmer and Pomeroy (2024) articulate a similar perspective in action research terms (although framing their writing primarily in the context of social rather than ecological challenge). After reviewing the familiar first- (subjective), second- (intersubjective), and third-person (outsider/objective) perspectives of action research, they point to the importance of 'fourth-person' ways of knowing as a new 'epistemic perspective', experienced 'through the non-conscious, pre-reflective bodily resonance'

We need a quality of knowing that allows us to connect with and appreciate more deeply the dignity and interiority of the worlds that surround us and that we co-shape and co-enact moment to moment... The core assumption underlying fourth-person knowing is that mind and world are not separate, but rather are intertwined in a co-shaping relationship (Scharmer & Pomeroy, 2024:20-21).

Co-operative inquiry with River is play, an infinite game (Carse, 1987) in which possibilities continually unfold. It is a practice which contradicts the repressive power of modern human thought and practice. It is a play that holds open possibilities for a just-glimpsed relationship between living, communicative beings; and so actively participates in regenerating and increasing the intersubjective field and through this co-creating meaning. 'Every vision is partial... knowledge is dialogue with itself and reality. In the dialogue those points of view modify, enrich, converge – and our understanding of reality deepens' (Rovelli, 2020:197).

The way you can go  
isn't the real way  
The name you can name  
isn't the real name' (Tao te Ching, as rendered by Le Guin, 1997).

There is no sentient River to invoke outside convivial encounter with other beings; and conversely no fully sentient human outside relationship with the more-than-human-world: as the Australian Aboriginal people put it, without humans, Land might feel lonely (Bessarab, 2010; Woollorton, Poelina, & Collard, 2022). In this sense our worldview, our 'imaginings'<sup>v</sup> of the world have 'real' impact, we *do* co-create our world. This is not just an epistemological issue concerning how we perceive and know the world, it has but ontological implications – concerning the nature of 'reality'. As McGilchrist puts it:

The nature of the attention that we bring to bear on the world, and the values which we bring to the encounter, change what we find; and in some absolutely non-trivial sense, change what it is. At the same time, the encounter... changes who we are' (McGilchrist, 2021:85).

And Snyder emphasizes:

The world is watching... not only watching, it is listening too. A rude or thoughtless comment... will not go unnoticed (Snyder, 1990a:19-20).

All this implies that when we (in the company of Otter, Kingfisher, Swan, and all the other beings in the communion of life) sing River alive, in some sense, that is exactly what we are doing. Some of us do this as part of their cultural heritage; others need the

metaphysical rationale to assure us that not being irrational, and to counter the mechanistic worldview into which we've been indoctrinated.

### **Some kind of conclusion**

Our experience is, after many cycles of inquiry over four years engaging with nearly one hundred River and human participants worldwide is that mutual communication between humans and Rivers is entirely possible. Rivers do speak – even the damaged and fragmented Rivers of the modern world. Of course, this doesn't take place in human language: it is necessarily a poetic order, conveying meaning in image and metaphor, taking place not in words or concepts, but through material form in a language of things. This has been known, part of the lifeworld, of Indigenous people for millennia (Bawaka Country et al., 2013; Bawaka Country et al., 2015; Kohn, 2013); however:

It is evident that experiences of a sentient, responsive, communicative world are available not just to indigenous people living in traditional cultures, but to all human persons willing to put in the time, the attention, to risk their taken-for-granted sense of self, and to open themselves to that possibility (Reason, 2023a:16-17).

Once we experience the response of the sentient cosmos to our invocation – when Kingfisher flies past, when the unexpected shower of rain falls – the encounter has immediacy, unexpectedness, poetic resonance, an epistemology of participation. Such experiences have their own authority and offer intimations of a world quite different from the materialist, brute world into which we moderns are socialized. Once we are open to such encounters we experience a deeper intimacy, a falling in love, with Earth and for life. As Freya Matthews puts it, 'we are smitten' and are 'simply be unable to *bear* to continue living in ways that trash this tender cosmos and disrupt the poetic order' (Ontopoetics I; & The Deep Law of the Living Cosmos, in Reason, 2024)

Once we even glimpse the possibility of this transformation of our place on Earth and in the cosmos, we are changed subtly but fundamentally. My own choice is to see this as the work of my retirement, my later years. But whatever work we are called to in response to the metacrisis of our time, this glimpse will change our approach radically. I hope this chapter makes two contributions to the field of action research. First, to open a wider field of inquiry, to show how action research can be part of a renewed, non-dogmatic metaphysical exploration; and secondly to emphasize that without this, our action research, however worthy, takes place within an essentially toxic worldview. This should encourage us all to be more deeply grounded, to work from a place of mutual love, and to humbly acknowledge the damage the Western worldview does to the more-than-human world and to other peoples.

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<sup>i</sup> The *Anthropocene* is the term originally given to the geological order supplanting the Holocene by meteorologist and atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen (Steffen, Crutzen, & McNeill, 2007); in the Anthropocene, human activities dominate and change fundamental Earth processes. The *Plantationocene* and *Capitalocene* are alternative names for the same process given by (among others) Donna Haraway, emphasising the domination of capitalist modes of production (Haraway, 2015); *Misanthropocene* and *Anthobscene* are self-explanatory neologisms.

*Chthulucene* is a term invented by Donna Haraway to emphasize the deep dynamic symbiosis of which humans are part (2015). *Ecoscene* and *Symbioscene* are self-explanatory neologisms in this context. See for example <https://theecologist.org/2020/feb/03/beyond-anthropocene>. Several other plays on the term Anthropocene have been suggested.

For an exploration of *permacrisis*, *polycrisis*, *metacrisis* see (Rowson, 2023). For *Earth System* see (Hamilton, 2017). For *Gaia Theory* see (Harding, 2009; Lovelock, 1979).

<sup>ii</sup> Lawyers for Nature <https://www.lawyersfornature.com/about/>

<sup>iii</sup> As botanist and Potawatomi plant woman Robin Wall Kimmerer has pointed out (2017), *how* we refer to sentient beings matters: to use the pronoun 'it' is not only odd and disrespectful, it objectifies. Yet standard English offers no alternative. Kimmerer suggests we draw on the Potawatomi word *Aakibmaadiziwin*, which means 'a being of the earth.' She asks, 'might we hear a new pronoun at the beginning of the word, from the 'aaki' part that means land? *Ki* to signify a being of the living earth. Not *he* or *she*, but *ki*.' Following Kimmerer's prompt, in this writing, rather than 'it', I often use '*ki*' singular and '*kin*' plural. I also capitalise the names of more-than-human beings whenever I intend to convey sentience and personhood. I do not capitalize the word 'human' in order to purposefully decentre and frustrate human exceptionalism.. All this can feel awkward and may take the reader a little while to get used to; but the awkwardness in itself alerts us to our habitual objectification of the world around us.

<sup>iv</sup> Schumacher College was a progressive college for ecological studies offering postgraduate and undergraduate programmes, research degrees, short courses. It was part of the Dartington Trust in Devon, England, but was closed by the Trustees in 2024. An independent organization, Schumacher Wild, continues with the aim of restoring the activities of the College <https://www.schumacherwild.org/>.

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ˆ This is how Justice Joe Williams, the first Maori Justice on the Supreme Court of Aotearoa/New Zealand, describes the Maori worldview. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=13etHLQd6EA>